DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 103 866 CS 201 926

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TITLE Creativity and the Literacy Crisis.
PUB DATE Mar 75
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (26th, St. Louis, Missouri, March 13-15, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Skills; College Freshmen; *Composition (Literary); Composition Skills (Literary); Course Descriptions; Creative Writing; *Creativity; *English Instruction; Higher Education; *Literacy; Reading Skills

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the immediate reason for the decline in literacy in our colleges is the shift from an emphasis on the traditional discipline required in construction to an emphasis on spontaneity in writing. Of the four phases of the creative process (preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification), only verification should be emphasized in college writing classes. Verification is defined as the phase dependent on reasoning and judgment and involving the expansion of the illumination in order to ensure its communication. A program for freshman English students who enter college without the basic language and communication skills is described. The course meets two days a week in a writing laboratory, two days in a reading laboratory, and one day in a speech laboratory. Minimal standards for the reading and writing sections of the course are determined, and any student who fails to meet the standards for either of the disciplines must repeat the course. (TS)

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Creativity and the Literacy Crisis

Patrick P. Garrett

I should like to offer a few comments on creativity and the literacy crisis in our schools today.

With a proponderance of our colleges and universities operating as open admissions institutions, the college composition teacher is finding increasing numbers of students who do not possess the basic communication skills of reading and writing. Genuine confusion exists for the teacher committed to the creative process and the minimal performance standards given him by his department. I contend that an immediate reason for the decline in literacy is the shifting emphasis from the traditional discipline required in construction to emphasis on spontaneity which surrounds the phenomenon commonly called "creative writing."

It is perilous to attempt to offer a working definition of that capricious and unmanageable noun---creativity. The very use of the word admits of some confusion of intent. Commenting on the overuse of the word, Jacques Barzun believes its common usage is an attempt to avoid the discipline of more precise diction and to avoid the responsibilities of feeling and thought. Partial definitions of creativity in terms of person, ability, process, and product may be galvanized in the following composite definition----"Creativity is a human mental ability characterized by a process which reorganizes existing knowledge to produce a synthesis which is novel to the producer, which usually resolves some conflict and which is considered valuable if the producer believes it useful or satisfying."

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Because creativity offers the highest promise for the humanist---the actualization of the individual-educators have forsaken much to insure its incorporation in all curricula. It is true that basic English skills seem less than challenging as a classroom subject. However, it must also be said that as social beings we must all try to master some basic foundation that we may communicate effectively with one another.

I submit to you that of the four commonly agreed upon phases of the creative process (preparation, incubation, illumination and verification) only one deserves our ultimate attention in college writing classes. Only verification, the phase dependent upon reasoning and judgement and involving the expansion or extension of the illumination in order to insure its communication, should direct our planning and development of writing courses.

Within the last fifteen years, much of the analytical end of learning how to write well has been sacrificed to mere spontaneity. Such a sacrifice has come about because critics of our educational system have vigorously attacked all drill as autocratic and demeaning. Not resisting, many English teachers have gladly turned to explicating their favorite literary works. The decline in reading and writing skills of those students entering college is dramatic. The mean scores on scholastic aptitude tests have dropped considerably during the past decade.

Teachers have become so enamored by the internal and external conditions necessary for the creative process that they have forsaken those activities which might remotely threaten maintenance of these conditions. It is ironic that in our worship of the right

environment we have negelected the subject at hand---the laborious task of verifying an idea through some common mode of communication. Verification is a conscious toil, a methodical wringing of the mental functions to bring about fruition of insight.

Every teacher of writing should be reminded often that although each student comes with a uniqueness, an exquisite difference that sets him apart---all share a common tongue. To abuse our common language by accepting the idea communicated without the central standards established by that language is to invite a loss of the belief in words. To lose a belief in words is to revert to a savage state.

I do not wish to confuse the issue. Creative teaching is still the best teaching. It is that teaching that brings magic and excitement to the most mundane subjects.

It is the distorted reverence of the creative process that has played havoc in our preparation of young writers.

Consider the student who enters college without the basic skills of reading and writing. His numbers are increasing annually. He must be dealt with realistically. The unfortunate fact is that the conditions for creativity must be denied this student if he is to realize any progress. One condition for creativity is psychological safety--which refers to absence of value judgement of the insight, acceptance of individual worth, and awareness of individual frames of reference. The student without adequate skills must be told that his skills are inadequate--an appraisal that may well remove psychological safety. Until one knows that he communicates beneath a performance standard, he has no real opportunity for improvement. Such an idea may appear harsh, but it need not--since it is obvious that in his

past academic career the student has been "accepted" and not trained to use the language with any expertise. A pole vaulter may be encouraged to explore a variety of techniques, but before he can he must be taught how to grip the pole, measure the runway, time his take off, and get the most out of his fiber glass.

It would extend the deprivation to approach a student without basic skills with the idea of improving his creative powers before he has learned to write a complete sentence, learned to select the right verb tense, learned to make subject and verb agree, or learned the rudiments of syntax. It is one thing to teach the student "to value his own unique perceptions of reality by consciously setting out to demand higher sensitivity," but it is another thing to teach him as an apprentice the craft of effective expression. Skill and craftmanship must be our locus, not talk of inspiration or the occult power over words so few are granted.

In an attempt to provide for the freshman English student who enters our school without the basic tools for communication, we have created a new course that draws from three separate disciplines. This course, English 100, sets out to teach the skills of reading, writing, and speaking. Although it cannot be expected that these poorly prepared students will achieve the verbal facility of other freshman who are better prepared, it is hoped that most of them have sufficient academic aptitude to master the fundamental skills of clear and correct expression necessary to meet the higher standards of performance in the second semester of freshman English. English 100 meets daily during a regular semester--two days in a writing laboratory, two days in a reading laboratory, and one day in a speech laboratory. There are minimal standards for the writing and reading sections of the course. Any student who fails to meet the standards for any one

of the disciplines must repeat the course.

In the writing laboratory, simple sentence construction and sentence sense are stressed. A programmed text is used.

Over 1,000 students have been enrolled in English 100 since its inauguration three years ago. Follow-up studies have been made of those students. The most gratifying finding revealed by these studies is that of those students who pass 100 and enter 102, 75% of them pass 102.

Dr. Steven Cahn wrote recently in a N.Y. Times editorial: "Indeed college education is gradually coming to resemble the Caucus-race in which everyone begins running whenever he likes and stops running whenever he likes. There are no rules. Still everyone wins, and everyone must receive a prize."

In closing I am firmly convinced that creativity and what it has come to mean is not the solution to the current literacy crisis.